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ABSTRACT

Women seeking to gain upper-level positions in the corporate structure find it difficult and usually are excluded from membership because their male counterparts use an exclusive vocabulary to communicate their successes to their superiors. Scholars predicted that when a critical mass of 30 to 35 percent women reached management level they would automatically be accepted; however, studies of Fortune 500 show this not to be true. Women were excluded by the rhetoric of male power codes because women communicated differently, because the perception existed they did not fit into the structure, and because women made men feel uncomfortable and anxious. Women entering certain discourse communities were automatically assigned specific behaviors that limited discourse. It was found in an analysis of the Bell System and Liberty Mutual Insurance Company cases before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that the entering position determined the future position, and women were precluded from discourse with upper echelon members of the community who promoted and gave recognition. Using military and sports jargon in professional communities created discourse codes that largely excluded women. This linguistic exclusion limited the ability of women to communicate their performances to the upper level corporate structure. (NL)

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WHAT WE'VE GOT HERE IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE
WOMEN'S STUDIES IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

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WHAT WE'VE GOT HERE IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE
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In professional communites, managers strive to achieve goals through and with people; thus communication is an intrinsic part of all managerial activities. How we communicate is a function of how we perceive ourselves and others, i.e., our ways of knowing, and the conventions of discourse within the organization. In The Managerial Woman, Hennig and Jardim compare a woman's experience in corporate America with the experience of a traveler in a foreign country...the language, the rules, the assumptions, the expectations...all are different. The study of women communicating in business must thus address the conventions of discourse within the professional interpretive communities of corporations. As Sharon Gibson states, "Recent research addressing/the relationship between values, methods, knowledge and beliefs of the audience and discourse models/ in specific professional communities reveals that professional discourse models are semiotic; that is the forms of discourse metaphorically represent the values and methods of the communities in which they are situated, the culture of the organization or group and their habits of thought." Communicators "within these communities must reaffirm community membership through their form of expression." (Gibson, p. 3)

Women seeking to gain membership in corporate communites have to date been frustrated in their attempts to permeate the male power structure. Some years ago scholars advanced a theory that as "critical mass" (between 30% and 35%) of women at managerial levels was reached, they would automatically be accepted as members in professional communities. Although the

number of women entering middle management has increased, women are still barred almost exlusively from the upper echelons of management, most significantly in Fortune 500 companies. Explantions for this exclusion include trait theories, corporate structure, human capital, and discrimination. (See Appendix C) In all cases, women are excluded from the rhetoric of male power codes.

In "Why Women Aren't Making it to the Top," a 1984 Fortune study, consultant Ann Carol Brown refers to "subtle barriers that stand in the way" of women's climbing the ladder of corporate success. She thinks the greatest impediment is one of comfort not confidence. Women know differently and communicate differently: "At senior management levels, competence is assumed. . .. What you're looking for is someone who fits, someone who gets along, someone you trust. Now that's subtle stuff. How does a group of men feel that a woman is going to fit. I think it's very hard." (p. 40)

Rosabeth Kanter sums up the problem metaphorically in The Story of O: ("O's" represent women and "X's" represent men.)

> When an O comes, the X's suddenly remember that they are X's. The X-tra awareness of X-ness can make the X's uncomfortable, like looking into a mirror for the first time. In fact, some of what seems like prejudice against O's is really just the X's discomfort at having to be more self-aware, at having to think about things that used to be natural. For example, who wants to spend a lot of time figuring out how to get in and out of a crowded elevator. Or worrying whether the lunch menu will be suitable for O's? Or wondering what to talk about with those different people? (O, pp. 78, 80)

What to talk about with those different people. . .. What about sports? A colleague of mine was listening to a male conversation about football. She suggested that the Colts' coach should

consider sending plays in from the sideline since Bert Jones' arm was swifter than his brain. The males in the group immediately snatched up the idea, closed ranks, and excluded her completely from the conversation.

Exclusion from texts representing the discourse community or steriotypically segregating women underscores the difficulty of male/female communication in corporations. Documents produced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in its complaint against the Bell System, for example, preclude communication by rigid segregation of women:

> A total sex segregation of jobs is reflected in virtually all. . .Bell System documents. Through pictures of males or females, pronoun reference or through straightforward identification, all jobs are strictly classified as male of female. This sex denotation of jobs is carried consistently throughout company personnel manuals, collective bargaining agreements, job descriptions, company publications, general company advertisements, requisitions for employees. . .interviewer's aids, training manuals. . .. Crafts jobs, outside sales jobs, and middle and upper level management jobs are always identified as male jobs. (Bergmann, p. 83)

Thus a woman attempting to enter this discourse community is automatically assigned specific behaviors that limit her ability to speak.

Another classic case of exclusion came to light in a lawsuit filed against Liberty Mutual Insurance Company. While the company was hiring both college men and college women, the women were hired for the position of claims representative, and the men were hired for the position of claims adjuster. As Table 1 shows, there are only three levels in the promotion ladder for claims representative, while the line of promotion for claims adjuster rises all the way to Division Claims Manager, the top position. In

fact in just one promotion (to Claims Supervisor) a male jumps higher in the corporation than does a female with three promotions. Bergmann comments, "the male adjusters were being groomed for possible promotion to middle-level and higher-level management jobs, so that in all likelihood their jobs offered more valuable training, more autonomy, and better contacts, with higher ups than the claims representative's jobs." (pp. 107-108) In this typical instance women are exluded from discourse with members of the community most likely to give recognition and promote advancement.

Discourse in professional communities and the discourse models derive in large part from codes created by the military and sports. A woman who is unfamiliar with this mode of discourse and its subtle codes is unable to affirm her membership in the discourse community. In Games Mother Never Taught You, Corporate Gamesmanship for Women, Betty Lehan Harragan argues that terms such as "punt," "pull rank," and "seventh inning stretch," represent professional jargon that incorporates codes that exclude many women: the rules and regulations of team sports that are so thoroughly inculcated in growing boys by their peers and coaches are completely foreign to adolescent girls. Codes that are second nature to men thus confuse women and cause them to bungle basic strategies.

What are some of the codes of these professional discourse communities? Hennig and Jardim asked professional male managers what they had learned from playing sports while growing up. Here are some telling responses:

What was it like? What did you begin to learn?

It was boys only.
Team work
Hard work
Preparation and practice, practice, practice
If you got knocked down you have to get up
If gave you a sense of belonging, of being part of something bigger than yourself
You learned that a team needs a leader because motivation or lack of it depends on the coach
You learned fast that some people were better than others but that you had to have eleven

What did you have to learn if you wanted to stay on the team?

Competition, you had to win
Cooperation to get a job done--you had to work with guys you wouldn't choose as friends outside the team
If you got swell-headed about how fast you could run, then the other guys didn't block for you any more
Losing, what it felt like to lose
That you win some, you lose some
How to take criticism--from the coach, your peers, the crowd
That you didn't get anywhere without planning and you had to have alternate plans
Once you knew the rules, you could bend them--and you could influence the referee. (pp. 22-23)

The rhetoric of power codes so thoroughly indoctrinated that it becomes second nature--this precludes women's ability to speak in professional corporate communities.

In addition to maintaining this paradigmatic sports code, men's inability to communicate with women about their performace on the job also interferes with women's ability to advance. A male banking executive quoted in Fortune says, "A male boss will haul a guy aside and just kick ass if the subordinate performs badly in front of a client. But I heard about a woman here who gets nervous and tends to giggle in front of customers. She is unaware of it and her boss hasn't told her. But behind her back he downgrades her for not being smooth with customers." (p. 41)Clearly this

failure to communicate, based on misconception at the best, prejudice at the worst, will prevent this woman from improving her performance and rising in the corporate hierarchy.

Perhaps just as distressing as is the plight of women denied membership in corporate communities is the plight of those few women who have become top wage earners. A 1982 UCLA Graduate School of Management and orn/Ferry International study of women from Fortune 1000 companies showed that 50% of the women are single (as compared with 4% of the men) and that 61% of the women are childless (as compared with 3% of the men). (McBroom, p. 236) Truly startling statistics!

Anthropologist Patricia McBroom interviewed successful women with careers in finance in The Thired Sex to find out how their lives compared to those of their male counterparts. She asked several executive men if they could have achieved what they had without a family: "They all said "No" without hesitation. Yet many women today are trying to achieve the same alone, having received a clear message that children and career do not mix; they cannot do both. (p. 25)

In an address given at Smith College in 1919, the speaker said, "We cannot believe that it is fixed in the nature of things that a woman must choose between a home and work, when a man may have both. There must be a way out, and it is the problem our of generation to find it." We must concur with Patricia McBroom when she wryly comments, "Considering that the better part of a century has passed since society has begun grappling with the issue in earnest, I would call that glacially slow progress. (pp. 237)

The problems of communication built into the modern corporate structure remind me of the preponderance of various sorts of dinosaurs, like Tyrannosaurous Rex of the Upper Cretaceous Period in North America: they simply had to die out for other species to prosper. The nature of our society is rapidly changing, with jobs in the service industries far outranking those in the more tradition bound manufacturing organizations (albeit with lower per capita income, especially for women) and with networking structures challenging the vertical, divisional and matrix structures that so clearly characterize masculine power codes. Communication between men and women is improving as are conditions for working men and women nationwide. My hope, which derives in part from class discussions in business and literature classes, is that this generation of young men and women will permeate the corporate communities with enlightened and sympatheic modes of discourse that will change communication patterns and crack the power codes of the corporate elite.

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